United Nations S/2008/733

Security Council

Distr.: General
26 November 2008

Original: English

Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in the Central African Republic and the activities of the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office in that country

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted in compliance with the request of the Security Council contained in the presidential statement dated 26 September 2001 (S/PRST/2001/25), in which the Council requested me to continue to keep it regularly informed of the situation in the Central African Republic and the activities of the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office in the Central African Republic (BONUCA). The report covers the period from June to November 2008 and focuses on political, security, socio-economic, humanitarian and human rights developments during that period. It also provides information on the work of the Peacebuilding Commission and the Peacebuilding Fund in the Central African Republic, as well as recommendations on the United Nations presence in that country, pursuant to the request of the Security Council dated 27 June 2008.

II. Political situation

2. Since my previous report to the Council, dated 23 June 2008 (S/2008/410), the political situation in the Central African Republic has been dominated by efforts to create a conducive environment for the convening of an inclusive political dialogue. The dialogue continues to be widely seen as a crucial first step towards national reconciliation and the stabilization of the country. As legislative and presidential elections, scheduled for 2010, are approaching, the dialogue is also seen as a process that could promote political inclusiveness ahead of the elections, without which the elections might not take place or their outcomes could be contested. Such a development could constitute an additional destabilizing factor in the Central African Republic.

3. The Council will recall that the holding of the dialogue was premised on the signing of a ceasefire agreement between the Armée populaire pour la restauration de la démocratie (APRD) and the Central African authorities, the signing of a comprehensive peace agreement between the Government and major rebel movements, and the adoption by the Government of a general amnesty law to enable all national political stakeholders, including members of rebel movements and

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exiled opposition leaders, to participate in the inclusive political dialogue. This sequencing was part of the consensus that emerged from the meetings of the Dialogue Preparatory Committee, held between January and April 2008.

4. Consequently, the ceasefire and comprehensive peace agreements were signed on 9 May 2008 and 21 June 2008, respectively, in Libreville. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement calls for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, as well as for amnesty for rebel fighters and their leaders. However, an abrupt halt in the dialogue preparations in August 2008 followed the tabling by the Government of three draft amnesty laws before an extraordinary session of the National Assembly. This prompted some key stakeholders, including APRD and the coalition of opposition parties, Union des forces vives de la nation (UFVN), to withdraw from the peace process. In their view, the draft laws were a violation of the letter and spirit of the recommendations of the Dialogue Preparatory Committee and the 21 June 2008 comprehensive peace agreement, as those draft laws were seen as favouring forces associated with President François Bozizé. The opposition and the rebel movements demanded the adoption of a general amnesty law that would cover alleged offences and crimes committed by all signatories of the peace agreements and their accomplices.

5. The withdrawal of UFVN and APRD from the dialogue process prompted my Special Representative, François Lonseny Fall, to engage in intensive consultations with various national stakeholders, and regional and international partners, with a view to breaking the deadlock and reviving the stalled peace process. In order to facilitate the resolution of the deadlock in the political process, I have met twice with President Bozizé to encourage him to take the necessary measures to facilitate the holding of the dialogue as soon as possible. During our meetings, President Bozizé reaffirmed his determination to hold the inclusive political dialogue.

6. On 15 September 2008, the first meeting of the Follow-up Committee to the Libreville Comprehensive Peace Agreement was convened under the chairmanship of the then Minister for Foreign Affairs of Gabon, Laure Gondjout. In the final communiqué issued after the meeting, the Committee called for strict compliance with the provisions of the 9 May and 21 June 2008 agreements and mandated the Mission de consolidation de la paix en Centrafrique (MICOPAX), the regional peace force of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), to supervise the implementation of an immediate ceasefire. During the meeting, APRD President Jean-Jacques Demafouth announced the return of his movement to the peace process.

7. In the meantime, the National Assembly had concluded its consideration of the amnesty bills and adopted, on 29 September, a single consolidated general amnesty law. The Amnesty Law covers offences committed by Government security and defence forces and rebel elements from 15 March 2003 to the date of the promulgation by President Bozizé of the law on 13 October 2008. It provides amnesty specifically to former President Ange-Félix Patassé, APRD President Jean-Jacques Demafouth, and the Forces démocratiques pour le peuple centrafricain (FDPC) leader Martin Koumtamadji, alias Abdoulaye Miskine, and their accomplices for embezzlement of public funds and assassinations, among other offences. The amnesty for rebel fighters is contingent on the fulfilment of certain conditions, including the commencement of a disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process within 60 days of the promulgation of the law.

8. Following the promulgation of the Amnesty Law on 13 October 2008, some national political stakeholders, including UFVN and APRD, rejected it and called for a review of the law, describing the conditions set out therein as unrealistic and unhelpful for the process of reconciliation. UFVN deplored what it described as the procedural flaws in the process leading to the adoption of the amended version of the initial draft agreed upon at the committee level of the National Assembly. The APRD President described the amnesty law as unacceptable and inconsistent with the spirit of the Libreville Agreement. He insisted that the cantonment of APRD elements should take place only after the dialogue.

9. On 24 October, the second meeting of the Follow-up Committee to the Libreville Comprehensive Peace Agreement was convened in Libreville, under the chairmanship of the new Minister for Foreign Affairs of Gabon, Paul Toungui. The Committee discussed the evolution of the situation in the Central African Republic since its previous meeting. While welcoming the promulgation of the Amnesty Law, the Committee took note of the concerns expressed by APRD and UFVN regarding the interpretation of certain provisions of the said law and, in this regard, decided to refer the matter to President El Hadj Omar Bongo Ondimba of Gabon for mediation, in his capacity as mediator of the Central African Republic peace process. The Committee also took note of a disarmament, demobilization and reintegration proposal made by the Government of the Central African Republic and decided to set up a working group to develop modalities of its implementation. The group is expected to submit its report by 18 November 2008 to the next meeting of the Follow-up Committee in Libreville. Such confidence-building initiatives between the parties will be crucial for the successful implementation of the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programme and the political dialogue may provide a suitable forum for building the required confidence.

10. On 7 November, President Bozizé signed a decree, expanding, to include opposition and rebel movements, the membership of the Dialogue Organizing Committee, an entity established in June 2008 to work on practical arrangements for the organization of the inclusive political dialogue. This had been a contentious issue since the establishment of the Committee. Following consultations with the opposition groups, the Government proposed, in the presidential decree of 15 November, to hold the dialogue from 5 to 20 December 2008. The names of four eminent African personalities, one of whom could be designated to chair the dialogue, have since been submitted to President Bongo of Gabon, in his capacity as mediator for the peace process in the Central African Republic, for decision.

11. Additionally, in a bid to create a more propitious political environment in the country, the Government recently released from prison 12 rebel leaders and fighters in compliance with the Amnesty Law of 29 September. This gesture was welcomed by the President of APRD, who in his letter dated 31 October informed President Bozizé that he had instructed his field commanders to identify sites for cantonment of rebel fighters.

12. It remains a matter of increasing concern to me that, despite the progress made towards the holding of the dialogue, new rebel groups, including splinter factions from existing groups, have emerged and consider themselves as being left out of the peace process. The new groups have repeatedly carried out attacks against Government forces in the unstable northern prefectures, and may constitute a new

threat to peace and stability in the Central African Republic, including in the immediate aftermath of the dialogue.

III. Military and security situation

13. The security situation in Bangui and its surrounding areas has remained relatively calm during the reporting period. However, reports of acts of burglary, break-ins and racketeering, involving elements of the defence and security forces, continued. In September, security in Bangui was strengthened amid speculation of attempts to destabilize the Government. No explanation was provided by the authorities for the heightened security measures. The measures came in the wake of the interception by the security forces, on 14 September 2008, of a vehicle loaded with light weapons in Bangui and reportedly destined for Bria in the Haute-Kotto prefecture, as well as the landing at the city's airport of four helicopters during the night of 24 September. The Director of the country's Immigration Services was killed by unidentified assailants in October.

14. In the north-western and north-central parts of the country, intermittent clashes have occurred between Government forces and various rebel groups. The union des forces démocratiques pour le rassemblement (UFDR) and FDPC rebel movements have, by and large, continued to observe a ceasefire since the signing of the 21 June 2008 comprehensive peace agreement. However, between 25 July and 31 October 2008, nine clashes were reported between APRD and Government forces, mainly in the north-western prefecture of Ouham-Pendé. The clashes left several people dead on both sides. On 12 November, an unidentified armed group carried out a deadly attack against Government forces in the locality of Sido along the border of the Central African Republic with Chad. In this regard, FACA has been reinforcing its positions in the prefectures of Ouham, Ouham-Pendé and Nana-Grebizi, and embarking on a massive countrywide recruitment drive.

15. In the north-eastern prefectures of Vakaga and Bamingui-Bangoran, the traditional strongholds of UFDR, the situation has remained relatively calm. This could be attributed to the adherence to the April 2007 Birao Peace Agreement and the presence of the European Protection Forces (EUFOR) in the area. However, infighting within the leadership of the UFDR movement has resulted in the emergence of splinter groups such as the Mouvement des jeunes libérateurs centrafricains (MJLC) and the Forces pour l'unification de la République centrafricaine (FURCA). In a show of strength, these groups attacked and briefly occupied the locality of Am Dafock in early October 2008, overrunning the national police and gendarmerie stations. On 8 November, a relatively unknown armed group, suspected to be a UFDR splinter group, attacked the town of Sam Ouandja, which hosts some 3,000 refugees from Darfur. As a result, on 9 November, nine humanitarian workers were evacuated by EUFOR elements.

16. Activities by highway bandits commonly known as zaranguinas have significantly decreased with the beginning of the rainy season, but continue to disrupt internal trade. Zaraguinas continue to operate with impunity in Ouham, Ouham-Pendé and Nana-Grebizi prefectures. In October, they attacked the village of Gaiboulaye and took seven people hostage.

17. The activities of self-defence groups, created initially to protect the local populations against zaraguinas, have considerably evolved in Ouham-Pendé

prefecture, where they have now reportedly transformed themselves into armed militias supporting the Government in its fight against the rebels. This has reportedly given rise to a cycle of reprisal attacks by APRD against local populations.

18. The situation in the south-eastern part of the country, in the prefecture of Haut-Mbomou, continues to be a source of concern due to the virtual absence of State authority and fears of possible incursions by elements of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) operating in northern Uganda. However, no LRA incursions have been reported since March 2008.

19. Operating traditionally in the eastern and north-eastern prefectures of Vakaga and Haute-Kotto, poachers have been gradually extending their scope of operations to the south-eastern parts of the country. Better armed and equipped, these groups reportedly traffic and sell small arms and light weapons. Although their activities have been curtailed by the rainy season, the possibility of collusion with zaraguinas or other armed groups could further destabilize the Central African Republic.

20. On 12 July, the operational responsibilities for the subregional peace force in the Central African Republic, FOMUC, were transferred from the six-member Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC) to the 10-member ECCAS. The force, now called MICOPAX (see para. 6 above), apart from its military component headed by Force Commander Hilaire Moko of the Congo, will also have police and civilian components under the overall leadership of a Special Representative of ECCAS. The mandate of MICOPAX will include the provision of assistance in consolidating peace and security, and in supporting the peace process and promoting respect for human rights.

21. BONUCA has provided capacity-building support to enhance the operational capabilities of 87 police officers and 40 gendarmes through training in criminal investigations, information gathering, professional standards and ethics. BONUCA has also organized training for 9 radio transmission technicians from the gendarmerie, 22 military administrative officers and 20 military engineers.

22. BONUCA has continued to support the United Nations Mission in the Central African Republic and Chad (MINURCAT) in the implementation of its mandate in the Central African Republic. My Special Representative, François Lonseny Fall, visited N'djamena in September 2008 to discuss with Special Representative Victor Da Silva Angelo ways of strengthening cooperation between the two missions and enhancing structured and coordinated collaboration to foster synergies and avoid duplication of efforts.

IV. Activities of the Peacebuilding Commission and the Peacebuilding Fund

23. During the period under review, the United Nations has worked in partnership with the authorities of the Central African Republic to complete the establishment of structures and mechanisms to support the implementation of a priority plan, approved for funding by the Peacebuilding Fund in June 2008. The priority plan addresses the immediate needs of the Central African Republic in the areas of security sector reform, good governance and the rule of law, and revitalization of communities affected by conflict. I have allocated $10 million from the

Peacebuilding Fund for these priorities. The Peacebuilding Support Office and the Multi-Donor Trust Fund of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have fielded two missions to support rapid implementation.

24. A National Steering Committee, co-chaired by the Minister of State for Planning, the Economy and International Cooperation, and my Special Representative, has selected a total of 9 projects out of 26 submitted proposals in all three priority areas, for a total amount of over $5.4 million. These projects will be implemented by UNDP, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), with relevant national partners. A second allocation from the Peacebuilding Fund could be forthcoming after the finalization, by the Peacebuilding Commission and the national authorities, of an integrated peacebuilding strategy for the Central African Republic.

25. At its second formal meeting in New York on 8 October under the chairmanship of Jan Grauls of Belgium, the Peacebuilding Commission's country-specific configuration heard a presentation by a representative of the Government of the Central African Republic on the country's peacebuilding priorities, which were later endorsed by the Commission. They include: (a) security-sector reform; (b) good governance, strengthening of the rule of law and respect for human rights; and (c) establishment of development poles. The inclusive political dialogue was identified as a cross-cutting priority. The Commission also held a thematic discussion on security-sector reform, and the rule of law and good governance on 22 October. A further thematic discussion will be held on the establishment of development poles.

26. Meanwhile, a Peacebuilding Commission delegation, led by Jan Grauls of Belgium, undertook a field visit to the Central African Republic from 30 October to 6 November to pursue its engagement with the Government of the Central African Republic and other key stakeholders on the main peacebuilding priorities and challenges facing the country, the actions being undertaken by the Government to address those challenges and the nature and scope of international support needed by the country. The field visit should help the members of the Commission in drafting the integrated peacebuilding strategy for the Central African Republic by gaining a better understanding of the realities on the ground. In the meantime, the Government has appointed its Minister of Planning and International Cooperation as the national focal point to coordinate the Government's engagement with the Commission.

27. Work towards the elaboration of an integrated peacebuilding strategy for the Central African Republic has thus been ongoing in the Peacebuilding Commission. The strategy will be the instrument of engagement that will govern the long-term relationship between the Commission and the Central African Republic. The document will be informed by a comprehensive mapping exercise of resources and gaps for peacebuilding in the Central African Republic. It is critical that the Central African Republic authorities maintain proactive engagement with the Commission during the ongoing process of developing an integrated peacebuilding strategy and make all efforts to ensure political stability, particularly at a time when the international community and the Commission, in particular, have actively

strengthened their engagement to help address the country's multifaceted challenges.

V. Socio-economic and financial situation

28. The socio-economic situation in the Central African Republic has been characterized by a slowdown in economic growth attributed to the difficult international economic environment, the decline of production in the agricultural, forest and mining sectors, delays in the mobilization of financial resources for the implementation of the poverty reduction strategy paper and constraints in the production and distribution of water and electricity.

29. The gross domestic product is expected to reach 849 billion CFA francs in 2008, against 805 billion CFA francs in 2007, representing a real growth of 3.5 per cent in 2008, compared with 4.2 per cent in 2007. This growth is driven by domestic demand resulting from more regular payment of salaries to civil servants, the payment of arrears due to cotton farmers, the creation and extension of factories in the timber sector, and the rehabilitation of fuel stations in the provinces.

30. In spite of the reduction of tax rates on some imported foodstuffs, the sharp rise in the prices of essential commodities, the adjustment of prices of oil products and the shortage of cement resulted in an increase of the annual inflation rate to 5.4 per cent, during the first half of 2008, against 1.6 per cent at the end of June 2007. During the same period, Government revenue increased by 6 per cent, from 44.1 billion CFA francs in the first quarter of 2007 to 46.6 billion CFA francs during the same period in 2008. Public expenditure decreased by 13 per cent compared with the same period last year. The increase in Government revenue is attributable to improved tax collection, the broadening of the Government's tax base and reforms in the fiscal system. Non-tax revenue also increased as a result of revenue accruing from licence fees in the telecommunications sector.

31. Economic prospects for 2009-2010 will largely depend on further stabilization of the country after the organization of the inclusive political dialogue, the continued rise in commodity prices, the evolution of the exchange rate for the United States dollar, the resumption of foreign direct investment, particularly in the mining and telecommunications sectors, the pursuit of reforms within the framework of the implementation of the poverty reduction strategy paper and improved relations with the international community.

32. The latest projections by the Government of the Central African Republic suggest that, based on current growth rates, the country's gross domestic product would rise to 950 billion CFA francs in 2009, with an actual gross domestic product growth rate of 3.9 per cent. This would mainly be attributable to improved performance of the cotton sector, the allocation of new forest exploitation licences, in accordance with the new forestry code, the commencement of uranium and diamond mining operations, and a boost in the construction sector, in particular roads, social housing and administrative buildings.

VI. Humanitarian situation

33. At the end of October 2008, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees gave the number of internally displaced persons in the Central African Republic as 108,000. Many of them continue to live in precarious conditions, with fear of being caught up in sporadic fighting between national security forces and APRD rebels. The number of Central African refugees in neighbouring Cameroon, Chad and the Sudan was estimated at 101,245. According to United Nations humanitarian agencies, some 85,000 Central African internally displaced persons and refugees have returned to their communities of origin. The number of refugees and asylum-seekers residing in the Central African Republic stood at 7,519. There are currently a total of 3,199 Sudanese refugees from southern Darfur living in Sam Ouandja camp, in Haute-Kotto prefecture.

34. In the framework of the humanitarian protection strategy, the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in collaboration with UNICEF and BONUCA, continued holding sensitization training courses in the Central African Republic for civilian authorities, members of the armed and security forces, and the regional peace force, MICOPAX, on human rights, international humanitarian law and the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (E/CN.4/1998/53/Add.2, annex). In addition, UNHCR has secured the approval of the Central African authorities for the same training courses to be extended to the Republican Guard.

35. The recruitment of children by armed groups has continued, and over 700 children remain associated with them. UNICEF and its partners have, thus far, separated 400 children from the UFDR rebel movement, and activities to reintegrate them into their communities have begun. In addition, UNICEF and its partners are preparing for the imminent release of 250 children currently associated with the APRD rebel movement.

VII. Operational activities in support of development

36. In the area of food security, FAO is implementing a market gardening programme that will reach 28,000 vulnerable families, 12,000 of whom are said to be affected or infected by HIV/AIDS. A programme aimed at transferring goats to conflict-affected areas is being implemented in 300 target associations comprising widows and other female heads of families. In order to alleviate the effects of rising foodstuff prices, FAO is carrying out a programme to supply 8,600 families with agricultural inputs.

37. From January to August 2008, the World Food Programme (WFP) provided assistance to 244,000 vulnerable and conflict-affected people with a total of 20,000 tons of food commodities, including emergency relief to internally displaced people and Sudanese refugees, school feeding for primary and preschool children, nutritional supplementary feeding for malnourished children and pregnant and lactating women, food for work projects for the rehabilitation of basic infrastructures and food aid to HIV-affected households. WFP continues to facilitate the movement of personnel and goods of the humanitarian community in the Central African Republic through its United Nations Humanitarian Air Service.

38. In the health sector, UNICEF has supported 7 therapeutic feeding centres and more than 10 outpatient centres in order to treat children suffering from acute

malnutrition. UNFPA has rehabilitated and equipped several health and youth centres. UNICEF, WHO and UNFPA have provided support to the authorities in dealing with outbreaks of measles, meningitis, hepatitis E, yellow fever and poliomyelitis. UNICEF and WHO have supported national immunization programmes against poliomyelitis, a three-round tetanus immunization campaign, a forum on access to health care for pregnant women and children and the fight against an outbreak of rabies in Bangui. UNICEF will distribute 740,000 insecticide-treated mosquito nets throughout the country.

39. In order to lessen the impact of the energy crisis, which has affected Bangui since June 2008, UNFPA supplied four power generators for health centres. Emergency medical kits have been distributed to humanitarian non-governmental organizations and to public health institutions through the Ministry of Health. UNFPA has carried out several initiatives to ensure uninterrupted water supply to maternity wards. UNICEF and partners have rehabilitated and constructed new water points, and distributed hygienic kits and water equipment, including to internally displaced persons.

40. UNESCO has provided assistance to the Ministry of Education in mobilizing $37.7 million under the fast track initiative by December 2008. UNICEF and its partners have facilitated the reopening of public schools and expanded rural schools for displaced children, allowing 74,000 children in the conflict-affected northern prefectures to return to school.

VIII. Human rights and the rule of law

41. The human rights situation in the Central African Republic during the reporting period has remained a matter of concern. Several cases of violations of the right to life, physical integrity, and freedom of movement by both Government defence and security forces and by the APRD elements have been reported. Cases of summary and extrajudicial executions have also been reported in conflict zones. Despite the signing of the Libreville agreements, the APRD elements have continued to carry out atrocities in areas under their control, including killings, pillaging, racketeering and forced enlistment of young villagers into self-defence groups or as informants. Clashes between APRD and Government forces have resulted in the displacement of some sections of the population.

42. Impunity continues to be a major challenge as alleged perpetrators of serious violations remain unpunished. The phenomenon of mob justice has become more widespread, including the execution of people accused of witchcraft. Prison inmates continued to be subjected to inhuman, cruel and degrading treatment by police investigators and elements of the Republican Guard assigned to detention centres as prison wardens. Prison conditions continue to be appalling, with prisons being overcrowded and lacking basic necessities, such as good drinking water, food for inmates, sanitation, health care and training for prison staff.

43. The judicial system continues to be undermined by arbitrary arrests, detention and delays in the administration of justice. Controversy over the Law on the Reorganization and Functioning of the Conseil Supérieur de la Magistrature seriously disrupted the functioning of the country's justice system due to strikes in September. The Law, which was adopted by the National Assembly amid public outcry, was subsequently declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court and

sent back to the Government for review. The amended Law, incorporating some of the recommendations of the Constitutional Court, was promulgated by President Bozizé on 23 October 2008.

44. In October, BONUCA published its first public report on the human rights situation in the country. The main objective of the publication was to engage the Government in a constructive manner with a view to helping it to adopt appropriate measures to address human rights challenges. On its part, the Government has made efforts to restore discipline and revamp the image of the armed forces through the dismantling of illegal checkpoints, dismissal of culprits and greater openness regarding operations in the north of the country.

45. Within the context of a common action plan between the members of the Protection Cluster, the Government of the Central African Republic and national human rights non-governmental organizations, two reports on violence committed against civilians since the beginning of 2008 and recommendations for remedial action have been shared with the Central African authorities. Furthermore, BONUCA and UNHCR, in collaboration with the members of the Protection Cluster, have taken steps with the Central African authorities for the establishment of a hotline for victims of human rights violations, including sexual and gender-based violence.

46. BONUCA has continued to provide support and training to the national women's organizations and national authorities in the areas of women's rights, women's living conditions in prisons, and women's participation in decision-making processes, in particular in the context of the preparation of the inclusive political dialogue. Within the framework of its partnership agreement with a local radio station, Radio Ndeke-Luka, BONUCA continues to organize a weekly programme on the promotion of the culture of peace, national reconciliation and protection of human rights in the Central African Republic.

IX. Review of the United Nations presence in the Central African Republic

47. In a statement to the press read by the President of the Security Council on 27 June 2008, the Council requested me to make recommendations on how the mandate given to BONUCA and to my Special Representative, as well as the configuration of BONUCA and the United Nations country team, should be revised to effectively support the work of the Peacebuilding Commission. In that context, an Inter-Agency Working Group on the Central African Republic was established in July 2008 to undertake a review of the United Nations presence and operational mandates in the country. Led by the Department of Political Affairs, the Working Group includes representatives of the Peacebuilding Support Office, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the Department of Safety and Security, UNDOCO, UNDP, the Department of Field Support, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP. In order to help finalize its review, the Group undertook a mission to the Central African Republic, from 28 to 30 October 2008, in order to consult with United Nations entities on the ground, national authorities and other international partners.

48. Through its meetings with national and international stakeholders, the inter-agency mission concluded that the primary challenge facing the Central African Republic was the resolution of the ongoing armed conflict, particularly in the northern prefectures, with a view to establishing sustainable peace in the country. It was also recognized that progress to that end depended on both the inclusive political dialogue and the improvement of the living conditions of the population.

49. With regard to the revision of the United Nations presence in the Central African Republic, the national and international stakeholders underscored the need for the United Nations to speak with one voice and act in a coherent and coordinated manner. While immediate measures will be taken to strengthen coordination between BONUCA and the United Nations country team within the framework of agreed common vision, objectives and priorities, and with a view to supporting the engagement of the Peacebuilding Commission in the Central African Republic, I intend to prepare proposals for an integrated United Nations presence for the Council's consideration.

50. With regard to the mandate of BONUCA for 2009, and in view of the forthcoming inclusive political dialogue, scheduled to take place from 5 to 20 December 2008, and its follow-up, it would be crucial that the Central African authorities receive the necessary support in implementing the conclusions of the dialogue. I therefore recommend that the mandate of BONUCA be extended for an additional year, from 1 January to 31 December 2009. During that period, BONUCA will: (a) assist the Central African authorities in the implementation of the outcomes of the inclusive political dialogue as well as peace agreements the Government signed with the country's rebel movements in 2008; (b) support the engagement of the Peacebuilding Commission and the Peacebuilding Fund in the Central African Republic; (c) contribute to the mobilization of resources to help the Central African Republic to enhance transparent political and economic governance; (d) promote respect for human rights and the rule of law; (e) provide and coordinate assistance, as appropriate, in the preparation of credible and transparent elections scheduled for 2010; and (f) continue to support MINURCAT operations in the Central African Republic.

X. Staff security

51. The dire socio-economic challenges faced by the population at large continue to contribute to the rise in criminality. During the reporting period, three traffic accidents and one home break-in affected United Nations staff members. United Nations personnel can circulate in the country, in accordance with security rules and specific guidelines, depending on the security phase in effect for areas to be visited. During the period under review, United Nations activities have been suspended in parts of north-western Central African Republic due to increased armed confrontations between the Government and rebel forces. Following an attack on the north-eastern town of Sam Ouandja on 8 November, one United Nations staff member and eight humanitarian workers were evacuated by EUFOR on 9 November. United Nations activities are currently suspended in that part of the country.

XI. Observations

52. The overall political, security and socio-economic situation in the Central African Republic remains fragile, compounded by a weak economy, multifaceted social problems and impunity, related to deep security challenges, particularly in the northern and south-eastern parts of the country. The culture of impunity for perpetrators of human rights violations by APRD rebel elements and Government forces continues, and it is an area of immediate and continuing concern.

53. I welcome the decision of the Government of the Central African Republic to convene the long-awaited inclusive political dialogue from 5 to 20 December 2008. I encourage the Central African authorities to bring this important initiative to a successful completion. The United Nations remains committed to supporting the process as the only viable and sustainable option to put a definitive end to the cycle of political and security instability in the Central African Republic. I, therefore, renew my appeal to all national stakeholders, in particular the Government and the armed groups, to work together within the framework of the signed peace agreements and to address their differences by peaceful means for the greater interest of the people of the Central African Republic.

54. The past six months have witnessed serious challenges for humanitarian workers, particularly due to activities of armed rebel groups, highway bandits and poachers as well as Government security and defence forces. In this regard, I wish to renew my appeal to all parties to give unhindered access to allow humanitarian assistance to reach the populations in need and to ensure adequate protection for humanitarian workers. This is critical for addressing the massive humanitarian challenges facing the Central African Republic. I also wish to commend the humanitarian agencies for their important work under very difficult circumstances.

55. In taking note of the recent transfer of operational responsibilities of the subregional peace force in the Central African Republic from CEMAC to ECCAS, I wish, once again, to commend the subregional leaders as well as the African Union and the European Union for their important political and financial support to that force. I appeal to them, as well as to other members of the international community, to continue to support MICOPAX to enable it to effectively discharge its mandate in close cooperation and coordination with the United Nations.

56. Addressing the socio-economic challenges facing the Central African Republic calls for commitment, dedication and unity of purpose among the various segments of society, including the Government, political parties, civil society and politico-military groups. The United Nations remains committed to supporting the people and Government of the Central African Republic in dealing with these challenges.

57. The recent release of the first public report on the human rights situation in the Central African Republic offers a unique opportunity for the opening of a constructive dialogue between the United Nations and the Central African authorities to address human rights challenges. I urge the Central African authorities to seize this opportunity to strengthen the rule of law and promote good governance by ensuring the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms and addressing the culture of impunity, with a view to its eradication.

58. I wish to express my appreciation to all United Nations offices on the ground, which continue to deliver vital assistance, within the framework and scope of their

respective mandates, to support the Central African authorities in their efforts to improve the complex situation in the country. As the recent inter-agency process demonstrated, there is a need to build on the existing achievements in our efforts to make United Nations assistance in promoting and consolidating peace in the country more coherent. As we endeavour to foster a more coordinated approach to our work in the Central African Republic, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and the Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator will be at the core of these efforts by bringing United Nations political and operational activities in the Central African Republic into greater harmony. I will revert to the Council with recommendations on an integrated approach that may further increase our concerted efforts in that country.

59. Finally, I wish to pay tribute to the President of Gabon, El Haj Omar Bongo Ondimba, for his untiring efforts in fostering peace and reconciliation in the Central African Republic. I take this opportunity also to convey my appreciation to the regional actors and organizations, as well as other international partners, for their contribution to the search for peace and stability in the Central African Republic. I would also like to commend my Special Representative in the Central African Republic, François Lonseny Fall, and his staff, as well as members of the United Nations country team, as a whole, for their continued commitment and dedication to the demanding cause of peace and development in the Central African Republic.